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### SUMMARY

Government Island exhibits national, state, and local historical significance. Located on this 17-acre island are the remnants of once plentiful sandstone that was extensively extracted for use as construction materials. Though quarried since the seventeenth century, this site provided its greatest contribution to the nation when the island, and subsequently its quarries, were purchased by the federal government in 1791 with the specific purpose of supplying the sandstone required for the building of the White House and the U.S. Capitol, the first two federal buildings constructed in Washington, D.C. Currently owned by Stafford County, Government Island exhibits historic significance identified in National Register Criteria A, B, and D. Not only did this site contribute to the founding of our nation's capital and the rebuilding of it after the War of 1812 (Criterion A); but it also is associated with nationally and internationally significant men such as Pierre Charles L'Enfant, and Benjamin Henry Latrobe (Criterion B); many nationally significant buildings such as the U. S. Capitol and White House were constructed with its stone, while other buildings such as Aquia Church and Mount Vernon used its stone in exterior architectural features; and the site exhibits a high degree of potential to yield significant historical information through its archaeological assets (Criterion D). Government Island exhibits a high level of historic significance because it was the only site purchased by the federal government specifically for the purpose of extracting stone for construction. In the eighteenth century, quality stone for building was difficult to locate in the Mid-Atlantic region. Because of the island's easily accessible and plentiful sandstone, as well as readily available transportation routes via Aquia Creek and the Potomac River, Government Island became one of the foremost suppliers of sandstone for architectural ornamentation of many local buildings built in the eighteenth century. It was not until the founding of the nation's capital in 1791 that the sandstone quarries of Government Island contributed to the building of Washington D.C.

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### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

"There is an island in the river Acquia, which belongs to the public, exclusively of one square acre owned by Mr. Stuart."

Benjamin Henry Latrobe, architect and surveyor of public buildings in Washington, D. C., wrote this statement in "A Private Letter to the Individual Members of Congress, on the Subject of the Public Buildings of the United States at Washington" on November 28, 1806. He was referring to an island commonly known today as "Government Island."

On November 28, 1678, George Brent purchased from Herbert Jeffreys, an agent acting on behalf of King Charles II, "12 acres of land lying in Stafford County with small point of Marsh joining to it lying in Aquia Creek." Because of a dispute concerning the original ownership of this tract of land, George Brent legally purchased the property from William Fitzhugh, acting on behalf of Lady Culpeper and Lord Fairfax, who owned the property according to an original land grant that deeded the entire Northern Neck region to them. 1. Tombstones and architectural ornamentation for cemeteries and nearby buildings were fashioned from Aquia sandstone quarried from what was then known as "Brent's Island" and other operating quarries along Aquia Creek such as Robertson's Quarry. On May 8, 1786 Daniel Carroll Brent sold one acre of Brent's Island for fifty pounds to Robert Stuart of Baltimore, Maryland, ending over 100 years of Brent family ownership of the site. Stuart's land was marked with four stones bearing the inscription of the owner's initials "RS." Today only one of these markers remains in situ, while another has been removed for safekeeping, and two have been lost.

The American victory over the British in the Revolutionary War paved the way for the newly established United States to fully establish itself in times of peace. Approved on July 1, 1790, the Residence Bill stated that a new city would be established as the capital of the United States. From December 1791 until December 1800, the government would convene in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, while the new capital was being established in an unsettled area near Georgetown on the Potomac River, territory quite familiar to President George Washington. During the nine years that the government was to meet in Philadelphia, construction of the federal city was to commence and provide NPS Form 10-900-a

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suitable buildings for the president and congress to occupy by December 1800. Furthermore, a commission of three members was appointed, and the president was given power to purchase land and oversee the development of this city. The Residence Bill set grand standards for this future city and hurriedly put the commissioners to work.

The first order of business was to survey the land in order to compose a plan of the proposed city. In 1791, George Washington hired Pierre Charles L'Enfant to survey the proposed area and design a plan for the federal city. In a

letter from Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, he instructed L'Enfant as follows:

You are desired to proceed to Georgetown where you will find Mr. Ellicott employed in making a survey and Map of the Federal Territory. The special object of asking your aid is to have a drawing of the particular grounds most likely to be approved for the site of the Federal town and buildings.

On March 4, 1791, L'Enfant arrived and set to work. The initial plan was to fund the construction of these public buildings with proceeds obtained through the sale of city lots. L'Enfant's design consisted of a city based on a grid pattern with major arterial streets linking destinations. Designated as the primary street linking the President's House and the Capitol, Pennsylvania Avenue was appropriately named in an attempt to appease the legislators convening at the temporary capital in Philadelphia. On September 8, 1791 the capital city was named "Washington, District of Columbia." The first sale of lots on October 17, 1791 witnessed the purchase of only thirty-six lots for a total of 2,000 dollars. This disappointing sale was attributed to L'Enfant's delay of printing the plan of Washington, which was not accomplished until February 20, 1792. Though L'Enfant had designed a magnificent city, his poor communication with the commissioners, delay of printing the official plan of the city, and inability to produce designs for the President's House and the Capitol led to his dismissal on February 27, 1792.

Government Island began its role with the development of Washington on December 2, 1791, when L'Enfant purchased Brent Island (Government Island) from Daniel Carroll Brent on behalf of the Washington commissioners, minus Robert Stuart's one-acre tract. L'Enfant was soon after dismissed from his position overseeing the construction of Washington, but with this purchase, he NPS Form 10-900-a

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secured enough sandstone for the construction of Washington to commence. As one of his last acts before being fired, L'Enfant defiantly directed his assistant Isaac Roberdeau on December 16, 1791 to visit the newly acquired quarry and begin stonecutting operations immediately. His report contained these instructions:

To repair immediately to Acquia Creek to see the qurries there belonging to the public--to have barracks erected thereon for twenty men on each of these quarries; viz, on the island purchased from Mr. George Brent & on that rented from Mr. John Gibson of Dumphries...

The exporting of stone must be begun at once on both quarries; they must be opened at once all round the island and on the main [land], on the whole front adjoining to the creek. The stone must be taken down as it comes and of any size and in a great quantity as the time will admit, recommending only that when the rock will be pound sound and free from staion that blocks of stone be extracted therefrom of the largest size every way as is possible. 11

Because of L'Enfant's inability to produce actual plans for the President's House and Capitol, design competitions were held. James Hoban, an Irishman working in Charleston, South Carolina had his design accepted for the President's House on July 18, 1792, 22 while Dr. William Thornton of the West Indies had his design for the Capitol selected in February 1793. By this time, Government Island was already providing sandstone for buildings in Washington. 14

On May 1, 1792 the Commissioners hired James Smith to transport sandstone from Government Island to Washington. In order to ship and receive the stone, wharves had to be constructed. <sup>15</sup> Unfinished sandstone was shipped from a partially existing stone wharf on Government Island via Aquia Creek, and received in Washington either at a wharf at the end of New Jersey Avenue bound for the construction site of the Capitol or at a wharf on Goose Creek for use at the President's House. Both buildings began construction in the summer of 1792 and were originally intended to be built of brick. On September 23, 1793 the commissioners complied with President Washington and L'Enfant's intentions by voting to use sandstone to encase brick; therefore making the Capitol and President's House more prominent. 16 This decision increased the demand for sandstone, requiring more trained stonecutters and masons to be employed both at Government Island and in Washington. NPS Form 10-900-a OMB No. 1024-0018

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## PRESIDENTS HOUSE (WHITE HOUSE)

Construction of the President's House (later known as the White House) commenced with the cornerstone laying ceremony on October 13, 1792. Based on the Leinster House located in Hoban's native Dublin, Ireland, the President's House was designed as a grand Federal-style dwelling with elaborate architectural ornamentation. 18 By the time construction of the President's House began, it was decided that sandstone would be used as ashlar to face the exterior of the brick walls, and would also be used in the exterior architectural ornamentation.

Providing stone for the President's House prompted the commissioners to hire William Wright as the superintendent of the Aquia quarries. He was replaced by Colleen Williamson on January 1, 1794, who subsequently was replaced by George Blagden. Because of slow production at Government Island, by 1795, the commissioners were forced to contract with other quarries on Aquia Creek in the vicinity of Government Island. More stonecutters and masons were hired, but labor disputes became a constant disruption. 20 Scottish stone workers were recruited to work at Government Island and in Washington. A lack of qualified stonemasons forced the commissioners to look to Europe for trained workers. The role of Scottish stone workers was greatly felt at the President's House because their skill allowed the Aquia sandstone to be quarried and finished in a most precise fashion. Mining the sandstone using skilled Scottish workers supervised by Blagden produced wonderful results. Latrobe provides a description of the process of cutting the stone as follows:

In working these quarries, the workmen having cut the face perpendicularly, first undermine the rock; -- an easy operation, the substratum being loose sand. If the block is intended to be 8 feet thick, they undermine it 5 feet, in a horizontal direction, in order that it may fall over when cut off. They then cut two perpendicular channels on each hand, 1 ft. 6 in. wide, at the distance from each other of the length of their block, having then removed the earth and rubbish from a ditch or channel along the top of the rock, they cut into the rock itself, a groove, and put in wedges along its whole length. These wedges are successively driven, the rock cracks very regularly from top to bottom, and it falls over, brought down partly by its own weight. Blocks have been thus quarried 40 feet long, 15 feet high, and 6 feet thick.

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The block which was quarried at my last visit to the quarry was of the following dimensions:--26 feet long, x 8 feet deep, x 14 feet high = 2912 feet, which at 15 feet to the ton, agreeably to the quarry rate, amounts to near 200 tons.—These masses are then cut by wedges into the sizes required. <sup>21</sup>

Ashlar stones were precisely cut and numbered, as were all of the architectural embellishments, which allowed for precise installation according to Hoban's design. Because of the intricacies of the carvings in the ashlar and in details such as the pilasters, capitals, brackets, pediments, consoles, etc., stonemasons engraved many of the stones with their Mason's Masonic Order marks, which were not revealed until twentieth-century renovations of the building. Over forty marks have been identified, attesting to the multitude of trained stonemasons working on the President's House. See the stone of the stone of the multitude of trained stone of the president's House.

In 1796, the Treasury Department and the War Department were designed as flanking buildings to the east (Treasury) and west (War) of the President's House. The buildings were less elaborate than the Capitol and President's House; but the 1800 deadline for the completion of these buildings prompted a design that could be constructed fast and cheap. Designed by George Hadfield, these buildings were constructed of brick with Aquia sandstone ornamentation, completed by 1800, and later linked to the President's House via colonnaded wings.<sup>24</sup>

Construction of the President's House would continue through George Washington's second term as president without being completed by the 1800 deadline established by the Residence Act, but it would be far enough along for President John Adams to occupy on November 1, 1800. Soon thereafter Thomas Jefferson became the third president of the United States, just a few months after Adams inhabited the President's House. Only the second president to occupy the President's House, Jefferson was the first to occupy this building for his entire term. Having previously played a large role in the construction of the President's House as President Washington's Secretary of State, it was very fitting that he would occupy this building, for unlike his predecessor, he was intimately involved in the development of Washington and its federal buildings.

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Thomas Jefferson did little to improve the building other than designing and having the east and west wings built. Because construction of the President's House was completed during his presidency, the majority of his attention was focused on the incomplete Capitol. By 1809, Jefferson had completed his two terms as president, and construction of the President's House and executive offices was finished.

#### CAPITOL

Construction of the Capitol did not proceed as smoothly as the President's House. The foundation was begun in August 1793 and the cornerstone laying ceremony occurred on September 18, 1793 with President George Washington officiating. By the spring of 1794, the foundation work was divided into two contracts, one for the south wing and another for the north wing. Though Dr. William Thornton was the architect of the Capitol, Stephen Hallet was chosen as the project manager for construction, with James Hoban acting as surveyor of public buildings. Hallet was to design a portico connecting the north and south wings of the Capitol. Similar to L'Enfant's experiences, Hallet had poor relations with the commissioners and did not produce any plans for the center section of the Capitol, which resulted in the substitution of George Hadfield for Hallet.

While the foundations for the north and south wings were being constructed using Aquia sandstone, the center section was void of any construction activity. Two different methods were used in laying the foundations and each had their faults, the south wing more so than the north wing. In fact, the foundation for the south wing would eventually be removed and begun anew. On July 13, 1795, the north wing was progressing rapidly ahead of the south wing when the first piece of Aquia sandstone ashlar was installed to the brick walls that were rapidly rising. By this time George Blagden had replaced Colleen Williamson as stonemason supervisor and propelled the cutting of stone at Government Island, as well as dressing and installing the stone in Washington. By the end of the 1799 building season, the north wing was almost fully completed, while only three of the exterior walls of the south wing had been constructed. In compliance with the Residence Bill, Congress moved to Washington in 1800 and first convened in the north wing of the Capitol on November 17, 1800. Neither wing of the Capitol was finished, but at least the north wing was habitable.27 Although Congress inhabited the Capitol in 1800, construction on this building would continue for many years. The south wing OMB No. 1024-0018 NPS Form 10-900-a (8-86)

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was nowhere near completion while construction of the center section had yet to begin. Sandstone from Government Island was used as ashlar to face the brick walls, carve architectural details, and as foundation stones in the original wings of the Capitol. With the appointment of Benjamin Henry Latrobe as surveyor of public buildings by President Jefferson, Government Island took on a much larger role as supplier of sandstone for the Capitol.

In 1803, Latrobe entered the public building scene in Washington and formed a strong relationship with President Jefferson while redesigning the Capitol and overseeing construction of this magnificent building. Latrobe intended to embellish this building and create spaces worthy of the newly formed United States. In a letter to President Jefferson, Latrobe not only discusses his intentions to design and build the Capitol out of stone, but states his dedication to the Capitol and the president as well.

The wooden column idea is one with which I never will have anything to do. On that you may rely. I will give up my office sooner than build a temple of disgrace to my self and Mr. Jefferson. But he has certainly too much good sense to persevere in his conceptions, after hearing all that is to be said against them.<sup>28</sup>

As surveyor of public buildings from 1803 until 1811, Latrobe focused his attention on building the south wing of the Capitol and redesigning sections of the north wing. The exterior of the south wing mirrored that of the north, but the interiors were completely different. The south wing was built with a vaulted ceiling and contained a grand room designed for oration.<sup>29</sup>

Government Island was repeatedly opened and closed by Latrobe who directed Blagden to quarry sandstone from this site, as well as to purchase sandstone from private quarries near Government Island. Latrobe needed as much sandstone as he could acquire for the Capitol, but his designs were running well over cost; therefore he needed to obtain sandstone as cheaply as possible. Government Island (referred to as the "Public Quarry" by Latrobe) tended to be used by Latrobe as a bargaining tool with quarries such as those owned by Daniel Carroll Brent, John Cook, and Robert Stuart to lower their price for sandstone. In an 1804 report on the progress of the south wing of

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the Capitol, Latrobe comments on Government Island and the pressing need for cheap sandstone.

All the freestone for the external walls, Entablature, and Ballustrade is provided, and the greatest part of it on the Spot. For the internal Colonnade all the Stone is ordered, most of it quarried, and much already brought to the Building. Early in the season the public Quarry on the Island in Acquia Creek was opened, and much useful Stone quarried: and it

would have been much to the advantage of the public, had the extent of the appropriation permitted us to have prosecuted this work. But it was found that to clear out the rubbish of former workings, and to provide for the conveyance of the stone to the waterside, altho' ultimately a measure of economy, would have made too large a deduction from the funds required to Carrie on the building itself, and contracts for stone with individuals were therefore preferred.<sup>30</sup>

Latrobe's correspondence provides the best records pertaining to the role of Government Island with the Capitol. On February 17, 1804 in a report entitled "Procuring Stone for the U.S. Capitol," Latrobe details the amount of stone expected from each of the Aquia quarries, including 600 tons from Government Island, that would be used to finish construction of the south wing. As the south wing progressed, Latrobe worked on the interior of the north wing, which he felt was poorly designed and constructed. On July 1, 1811, Latrobe's tenure as surveyor of public buildings ended, although he would once again regain this position. Under Latrobe's direction, the exquisite, though over budget south wing had been completed; the interior of the north wing was partially rebuilt, including the famous corn cob capitals carved from Aquia sandstone; and the wings connecting the Presidents House to the Treasury Department and War Department had been constructed. Latrobe was heavily criticized for promising what he could not deliver, routinely spending beyond the budget, and not completing the center section of the Capitol. By 1814, the Capitol consisted of a north and south wing attached by a wood canopy. Both wings were constructed of brick and faced with Aquia sandstone, which was also used on the majority of the interior architectural details.

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# THE WAR OF 1812 AND BEYOND

On August 24, 1814, fresh from their victory at the Battle of Bladensburg, British troops entered Washington and wreaked havoc on the city. What was viewed as retribution for the American burning of York (now Toronto), the British troops burned many of the public buildings in Washington including the President's House and the Capitol. Because of a fortunate rainstorm that evening, many of the buildings burned on August 24 and 25 were not completely obliterated. In the aftermath of the British siege, the north wing of the Capitol was badly damaged, but the south wing was not. 33 The President's House survived as a burnt out shell, its Aquia sandstone exterior and badly damaged brick walls still standing. President James Madison ordered that the buildings be rebuilt according to their original design with an emphasis on repairing and replacing wherever possible. James Hoban and Latrobe were rehired, with the latter confined to the Capitol and Hoban to the President's House. Both men worked under Colonel Samuel Lane who acted as the lone commissioner and hurried the construction. 34 Latrobe enthusiastically accepted this position though it would be short lived.

On April 19, 1815 in a report concerning the conditions of the public buildings, Latrobe stated:

The expedition with which the work will proceed depends mainly upon the supply of materials, and the facility with which workmen may be procured...The stone is still in the Quarries and the Quarries are not yet opened. Therefore it will be in the first place necessary to ascertain from whence the supply of Stone is to be procured, and to ensure as great exertions from those who may deliver it, as is practicable...it is very certain that we shall want a limited supply of stone from below, for the repair of all the exterior of the building, which ought to be of the same material with which it was formerly built. No time therefore is to be lost in making arrangements with the proprietors of the Quarries on Acquia...it is my opinion that there will a great difficulty in procuring a sufficient number of Stonecutters to proceed with all the contemplated buildings at once, but none in the supply of Stone and other Materials, and that for freestone the principal dependence will be to be placed on the quarries at Acquia.<sup>35</sup>

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This report clearly states Latrobe's intentions of rebuilding the Capitol with the same stone used in building it. Government Island was soon reopened and began producing sandstone for the President's House and the Capitol, although Seneca Quarry in Maryland was also used as a source of sandstone.

The President's House was rebuilt in three years from 1815 until 1818. Because of its surviving Aquia sandstone walls, the whole building did not need to be rebuilt. Under Hoban's direction, the Presidents House was finished in time for a New Year's Day celebration in 1818, though work would continue until 1820. The wings linking the President's House to the Treasury Department and the War Department were not rebuilt, but these executive offices as well as two new ones, the State Department and Navy, were constructed. Aquia sandstone was used to replace those portions of the President's House that were damaged beyond repair. The building was then painted white rather than whitewashed, as it had been originally, contributing to its nickname the "White House." Built with Seneca sandstone, the south portico was not built until 1824 and the north portico not until 1829. Since 1829 the exterior appearance of the White House, minus the addition of the east and west wings, has little changed. Although the interior has been altered, the exterior of the original building remains virtually the same despite multiple restorations of sections of Aquia sandstone.

The rebuilding of the Capitol on the other hand did not proceed as smoothly as the President's House. Sandstone from Government Island and other Aquia quarries were slow to produce quantities required for the rebuilding of the Capitol, so Latrobe substituted sandstone from quarries on Chopawamsic Creek, also located in Stafford County. Marble from the Potomac River in Maryland was also used in rebuilding the Capitol, primarily for interior details. Latrobe made grand improvements to both wings of the Capitol, but his errant behavior, warranting his dismissal in 1811, once again led to his resignation under

pressure on November 24, 1817. Charles Bullfinch replaced Latrobe and completed the north and south wings of the Capitol by the end of the 1819 building season.<sup>37</sup>

Bullfinch not only completed the rebuilding of the Capitol, but also oversaw construction of the center section that was to link the north and south wings. He based the design for the center section upon Latrobe's, but with a few alterations. His design was approved in March 1818 and the cornerstone laying

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ceremony occurred on August 24, 1818. The central section consisted of a rotunda with a dome, projecting east portico, and multiple committee rooms. Aquia sandstone would be used in the east portico, which began construction in 1823 and contained twenty-four columns; each carved from a single piece of Aquia sandstone from Government Island. The east portico was completed in 1828, just in time for the inauguration of Andrew Jackson as president. With the center section complete the Capitol was finished and Bullfinch was released from duty. 38

The Capitol would undergo subsequent additions and renovations, each one occurring without the use of sandstone quarried from Government Island. The 1958-1962 extension of the Capitol's east front included the rebuilding of the portico and the removal of the columns. In 1984 the salvaged columns were transferred from their storage at Rock Creek Park in Washington, D.C. to the U.S. National Arboretum. In 1988, they were reconfigured in their original portico design as part of a recreated landscape. The north and south wings of the Capitol, along with the center building, exist in their original place, forever testifying to the significant role Government Island played in the construction of this important symbol of American democracy.

## OTHER BUILDING CONTRIBUTIONS

Government Island was one of the most productive sandstone quarries in Virginia. The stone was primarily used as architectural ornamentation in buildings throughout the region. Though Government Island was heavily quarried for use in constructing the public buildings of Washington, many other buildings throughout the region were adorned with its sandstone. Aquia sandstone was used to carve the quoins, doorframes, and keystones of nearby Aquia Church (NHL 1991). William Copein, the stonemason who constructed Aquia Church, also worked on Pohick Church (NRHP 1969) in Fairfax County, most likely using Aquia sandstone in its construction. Brent Cemetery (Stafford County Historic Overlay District) contains among others, the final resting-place for two of George Brent's daughters who passed away in the latter quarter of the eighteenth century. Many of the tombstones contained in Brent Cemetery were carved from Aquia sandstone, most likely from Brent's Island (Government Island). Another famous dwelling in the region, Mount Vernon (NHL 1960) used Aquia sandstone in construction of the front steps. In his diary, George Washington recorded that, "Cornelius McDermott Roe returned, having had

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the offer of stone [from] Mr. Brent."40 Washington is referring to Daniel Carroll Brent, owner of Government Island before the federal government purchased the site. Washington's connections to Stafford County were strong, and the Brents were a prominent family in the region. Built in 1792 from Aquia sandstone by John McComb, the Cape Henry Lighthouse (NHL 1964) secured ships safe passage into the Chesapeake Bay for the first time. 41

Because of its popularity, Aquia sandstone was most likely incorporated in other regional buildings, but those discussed here are the most prominent surviving examples.

### CONCLUSIONS

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Government Island is a nationally significant historical site because of the significant contribution that it made providing Aquia sandstone for the construction of many prominent buildings throughout Virginia and Washington, D.C. 42 Criterion A is justified because of the role that Government Island played in the founding of the capital city, Washington, D.C. beginning in 1791. Federal buildings needed to be constructed, and it was the vision of George Washington and Pierre Charles L'Enfant to construct them out of stone, in order to display their importance to the young nation. L'Enfant provided an ample source of sandstone through his purchase of Brent's Island (Government Island) on behalf of the commissioners of Washington. As the only federally owned source of construction material for the building of Washington, Government Island contributed heavily to the building of Washington, D.C. Not only did Government Island provide Aquia sandstone for the building of the White House and the U. S. Capitol, it also provided the same stone for the rebuilding of these buildings after they were burned during the War of 1812. Criterion B is justified for the island's association with Pierre Charles L'Enfant and Benjamin Henry Latrobe. Washington, D.C.'s original planner and architect, L'Enfant brokered the deal for the federal government to purchase Government Island for the use of extracting sandstone. As the second architect of the Capitol, Benjamin Henry Latrobe, who ordered the use of Aquia sandstone from Government Island to be used while routinely opening and closing Government Island in attempts to broker economical prices of sandstone while operating under a tight budget. Few archaeological studies other than registering the site with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources (44ST110) have been conducted on Government Island. Because of this, there is much to be learned concerning life of the workers at this site, NPS Form 10-900-a OMB No. 1024-0018

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the stonecutting process, as well as information about Native American activity on this site. The site has remained free from development intrusions and has not been actively quarried since the 1820s; therefore this site represents the ability to yield high levels of archaeological information concerning quarrying operations, as well as Native American activity on Government Island, justifying Criterion D.

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### Endnotes

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